

ALLOTS VS. BULLETS >>

DIALOGUE IS THE BETTER WAY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

by Mary Branham



Photo by David Eullitt

Ohio Sen. **Frank LaRose** has been working with the National Institute on Civil Discourse to spark discussion about the way legislators converse with one another. He believes restoring civility in government will improve the success of the federal—and state—governments.

Read the full interview with Frank LaRose at capitolideas.csg.org.

1 Why is civility in government important?

"I think the way that we relate to one another and the way we engage in conversation has a lot to do with how well the process functions and how well we can serve the citizens that we represent. ... The end goal is to better serve our constituents because that's why we're here. ... Each of us in the legislature represents a constituency, and each one of those constituencies deserves to have their voice heard through their elected representative. When you get into a hyper partisan environment where people are just sort of blocking the minority opinion out, for example, there are our fellow citizens who aren't being heard in the debate and that's not how it should function."

2 What does civility in government look like?

"It's not just about us being nice to each other. That's certainly an added benefit. It would be a much better work environment to be friendly to each other, but it's not just as simple as that. ... I did a radio interview on this and described it as this, not to be sort of too esoteric here or big picture, but in the entire course of human history we've found two ways to solve our problems: You can use force or you can use dialogue. You can use ballots or you can use bullets. ... I much prefer the first choice—the route of discussing things. That's what legislatures are all about: getting together, discussing problems and finding ways to reach that compromise."

3 Does the tone in Washington affect the perception of how government works?

"I think that largely a factor of this is what the average citizen hears and sees most is news about what is occurring in their federal legislative branch. As sad as it may be, a lot of times people don't really know the difference between a state senator and a U.S. senator. ... The fact is that people see that and think that's what goes on. Sometimes those arguments trickle down to the state level as well. Sometimes when the rhetoric gets a little heated or coarse, it's often surrounding federal issues that we really don't have much to do with."

4 Have other things contributed to the breakdown of civility?

"I really believe that the way we draw district lines has a deleterious impact on our civil discourse. We're working on an effort—and every state is different in this regard—to change the way district lines are drawn. Quite simply stated, we've gotten to the point to where we've gotten so good at drawing district lines with GIS, mapping technology and polling that we draw these districts where the majority of my colleagues are much more focused on spring elections than fall elections, meaning that everybody's focus is on avoiding, if possible, and winning, if not possible, their primary. By definition, that doesn't make for pragmatic legislating, despite the fact that there are good people that serve in very noncompetitive districts."

10?

5 How do you address the lack of civility in the public sphere?

"I am a member of the Republican Party. I don't agree with much that the Obama administration does, but I find myself defending the president from time to time when people say things like, 'I hate that Obama.' And I'll stop them at public gatherings or even family Thanksgiving discussions or whatever else. I'll say, 'that word hate, that's a pretty harsh word. Let's not use that. You don't know the man personally. He's a good father. He loves his wife. He loves his children. I believe that he loves this country. We just disagree on his positions. You may even hate his policy stances, but hating him is taking it too far.' I think a very common reaction anymore is that people dislike a public policy stance and they manifest that in a hatred for the individual. It shouldn't be that way."

6 Should elected officials try to rein in some of that hostility?

"That's absolutely a responsibility that all of us have as elected officials, particularly if it's an event that we're conducting. We take on, in this role, a responsibility to set the standard in some ways, to be a center of influence among our peers and among our constituents. ... I think we have an opportunity and a responsibility to step in when the rhetoric goes too far and try to set an example."

7 Does partisanship in the media feed that attitude?

"With the diffuse sources of information available to the modern news consumer, you are going to find things out there that are going to reinforce opinions. And many of those outlets play on that and they want to find the most divisive mouthpiece they can find. Unfortunately, the old model of coming to Washington and working hard and gaining seniority and becoming a prominent member of Congress that way has been supplemented by another way, and that is to say the most bombastic things you can in front of a cable news camera and gain notoriety. ... We're sort of rewarding the worst behavior by shining the spotlight on these folks that aren't interested, necessarily, in governing and problem solving."

8 How can policymakers deal with colleagues in a more civil manner without offending the base?

"The middle, by definition, is where the friction is. If you're on the far right, people generally leave you alone because they know where you are. If you're on the far left, people leave you alone because they know where you are. If you're one of those rare, anymore, people that are in the middle and want to find that pragmatic solution to a problem, you end up getting ground up a lot. I try to engage in an ongoing dialogue ... with folks to let them know what I'm doing. I really believe that the vast majority of Americans ... aren't really far left or far right. They tend to live more between the 40-yard lines, to use a football analogy, and not in either end zone."

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9 What have you done in Ohio to improve civil discourse?

"We talked about some things that we could do ... to make a difference. One of them was to try to include in the new member orientation—which in Ohio with term limits is more frequent—to try to have a civility component. ... An idea from (the) U.S. Senate is to encourage new members to identify mentors, and not just a mentor on your side of the aisle, but to pick a mentor on each side of the aisle. ... One of the other ideas was district exchanges. The notion behind this is to start encouraging better relationship building across the aisle. This idea was to ask people voluntarily to pair up with somebody who represents a different geographical area than you do or a different type of district and then spend a day in each other's district. ... Finally, one of the ideas we have, and we need to put some more meat on the bones, is to try to find more occasions for social interaction. ... What we're talking about is try to bring back a collegiality that leads to problem solving and, at least, a basic level of trust."

10 What is one thing legislators can do immediately to improve civil discourse?

"Let's make a real effort to question each other's policy stances, but not question each other's motivations, because I think that's where it really starts going down the wrong path. One of my colleagues may be pro choice and I'm pro life, but let's question whether it's a good policy or not. But let's not say you want to have a war on women. That really misses the point. That really takes us to where we don't want to be as far as having a constructive conversation." [Q]

Straight TALK

WHAT NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION WOULD YOU RECOMMEND FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS?



SEN. BILL SAMPLE

Arkansas

2013 CSG Toll Fellow

WORK TOGETHER

"The New Year's resolution I would make for state policymakers would be to focus on working together in order to do what is best for the people of their state. The political party of a legislator shouldn't be a factor in determining if his or her ideas are good ones. A plan of action that benefits our state should be supported by all of us, regardless of its origin. We are elected to represent the people and we cannot do that if we are so blinded by party affiliation that we fail to embrace what's best for those we serve. Together we can provide an example of how government should work."



MEAGHAN BRENNAN

Director of Budget Development,
Planning and Administration

Delaware

2013 CSG Toll Fellow

KEEP EVERYONE IN MIND

"For 2014, I charge state policymakers to keep all groups of society in mind when making public policy decisions. While it can be easy to remember the majority, those whose voices cannot be heard deserve representation in state government—specifically, cost-effective, relevant services and opportunities that permit full participation in society. These fellow citizens, from children to the elderly to persons with disabilities, often have concrete needs not satisfied by the marketplace or charity organizations. Smart state policies can benefit not just those whom they directly serve, but also offer a high return on investment for the states."